

# THE WEATHERVANE

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**TAKE HEART, AMERICA. SOME GOOD THINGS ARE HAPPENING.** A bit frightening to note we have passed the 50th anniversary of the Surgeon General's report on smoking and health, a powerful document that brought tobacco to the public's attention. The discovery that tobacco causes cancer didn't happen in a lab or spring from clinical trials. It came from careful analysis of mounds of data. Your editor was in medical practice at that time, and was proud of the AMA stand. It is now half a century that we have been preaching to our tobacco smoking patients that nicotine addiction is a fatal disease. Many do not want to believe, of course, but the statistics prove the point. According to new data published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) an estimated 14% of adults admitted in 2017 to every day tobacco use. In 1965 that number was 43%, and a drop of this magnitude represents a profound decline in tobacco use. This is a remarkable public health accomplishment which demonstrates that current strategies are working and need to be pursued. Yet, each day 3,200 youth (younger than 18) try their first cigarette and 2,100 progress to become daily smokers. The battle continues.

## THE JOINT COMMISSION: MUCH ADO ABOUT NOT MUCH AT ALL.

Research recently published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) punched holes in the claims of federally approved organizations about benefits of the hospital accrediting industry. The data revealed that patients who select a hospital accredited by the Joint Commission get no better results over hospitals reviewed by other accrediting organizations. This follows a report last year in the Wall Street Journal that problem-plagued facilities routinely kept their joint Commission endorsement. These reports come amid mounting federal oversight of the accreditation system. The Harvard University study challenges the assertion that patients benefit when a hospital is accredited. Big wealthy hospitals that generally have more resources are more likely to be Joint Commission accredited, and the thinking is they have better outcomes. Ashish Jha, director of the Harvard Global Health Institute, an author of the study said, "What you find is that it doesn't have a big effect, and it really makes you worry. We've put a lot of faith and resources into accreditation." Like others Dr. Jha has been a critic of the process. So, it seems that the accreditation industry has produced a lot of wheel-spinning without much benefit. And that's where a big medical budget item needs to be examined.

## ROLL THE DRUMS. SOUND THE HORNS.

You won't hear about it, but the Trump administration has saved Americans \$26 billion on prescription drugs. Yes, over the first 20 months since he was elected, an astounding 1,617 generic drugs identical to branded versions have become available. They are sold at much lower prices when the patents expire. The Council of Economic Advisers measured the savings at \$26 billion. Most amazing is that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is speeding up even as fewer patents expire. Commissioner Scott Gottlieb is clearing out an application backlog. For all the hoopla about European health care systems, the American generics system is the envy of the world. Nine in ten

prescriptions in the United States are cheaper generics saving \$265 billion last year, compared with 70% in Canada and less than 50% in Europe. The FDA notes that as of August 2018 the relative price of prescription drugs was lower than December 2016, which is a dose of reality to anecdotes about skyrocketing costs. The curious part is that our windy chief executive hasn't taken credit for the good news.

## THIS SHOULD NOT BE HAPPENING.

Data recently released from CDC show that life expectancy for Americans fell again last year pushed down by the sharpest annual increase in suicides in almost a decade. The United States lost three tenths of a year in life expectancy since 2014, reversing what is expected in a developed nation, and lagging far behind other wealthy nations. As drug and suicide mortality has risen, deaths from heart disease, the nation's leading killer went down slightly, but failed to offset mortality from other causes. Life expectancy in Japan is 84.1 and 83.7 in Switzerland, first and second in the most recent ranking by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. The United States is 29th at 78.6 years. Drug overdose deaths skyrocketed between 2015 and 2017 for adults between ages 25 and 44. The main culprit was fentanyl and other synthetic opioids that became pervasive in illicit drugs in the United States around that time.

## SOMETIMES YOU NEED TO HAVE A VENOMOUS FRIEND.

In Havana, Cuba, Pepe Casanas, 78, has discovered a tried and true way to treat his rheumatic pain. Once a month for the past 10 years, Casanas seeks out a blue scorpion, which is endemic to Cuba, and lets it sting him. "I put the scorpion where I feel the pain," Casanas told Reuters. After the sting it hurts for a while, "then it calms and goes away and I don't have any more pain." In fact researchers have confirmed that the scorpion venom has anti-inflammatory and pain relief effects. It may even delay cancer growth in some patients. A Cuban pharmaceutical company has been selling a homeopathic pain remedy called Vidatox made from scorpion venom. Casanas a former tobacco farmer takes a simpler route. He sometimes keeps a scorpion under his straw hat for luck where he says it likes the shade and humidity.

## ADDENDA

- George Washington used household chalk as a tooth whitener.
- Coca Cola spends more money on containers than it does on making the soda.
- Knee high to a grasshopper: The knee-high measurement of an average-sized grasshopper is about ½ inch.
- I started a grease fire at McDonalds. Threw a lighted match into the cook's hair.
- We may come to realize that chastity is no more a virtue than malnutrition.
- Advertisements contain the only truth to be relied on in the newspaper.

## ALOHA AND KEEP THE FAITH **rts**

*(Editorial comment is strictly that of the writer.)*